DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 409 CS 508 187

AUTHOR Stoddart, Scott F.
TITLE The Private Voice Made Public Record: "Common Threads" and Filmic Strategy.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 10p.; A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; Discourse Analysis; *Documentaries; Film Criticism; *Films; Higher Education; Media Research; Models
IDENTIFIERS Common Threads (Film); Film Viewing; *NAMES Project Quilt; Narrative Text; *Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Robert Epstein's Academy Award winning documentary "Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt," which consciously employs a binary rhetoric, a "common" method, by which to read the complex narrativity of the Names Project Quilt (the quilt memorial to AIDS victims). The paper addresses the inherently rhetorical parallel between the documentary feature and argumentative strategy, purposely using it as a pedagogical model: the rhetorical methodology involved in argumentative instruction mirrors the process of the filmic event. The stories in film provide, collectively, a deeply politicized voice, speaking for those dead of AIDS, those who survive them, and those still living with HIV. Sequence is the initial organizing strategy for the documentary, split into two distinct parts: five "storytellers" make their private stories public, and these are interspersed with traditional documentary news reel footage. The next central element is character, the chief responsibility of the storytellers as they make public their personal grief. Epstein's use of dialogue/text sequencing allows three distinct levels of discourse: a standard "voiceover," the voice of the news footage, and the voices of the interviewees, revealing sadness, anger, and hope. The final point of perspective instrumental to documentary logic consists of motivation, similar in nature to the rhetorical "call to action." The film provides The Quilt with a public voice to awaken all Americans, to empower all spectators, as it reveals the traditional American notions of community spirit and effort in the face of personal horror. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Scott F. Stoddart
Nova University
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Scott F. Stoddart
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The Private Voice Made Public Record:

Common Threads and Filmic Strategy[1]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED357409

Upon my first visit to Names Project Quilt this past December, I was struck by the binary operations of its rhetoric. While it witnesses death, it speaks life; while it characterizes sorrow, it embraces happiness; it appears to organize and pattern the chaos of AIDS; it seems to solicit somberness while sharing wit and gaiety. As a memorial to individual privacy, it publicly celebrates the many lost to the cause. In this light, Andrew Sullivan's analogy to the Vietnam War Memorial appears most apt: "Neither experience was forgettable; and neither still faintly morbid" (42). I now personally attest that its quiet power loudly speaks volumes to its visitors.

Perhaps, to some, it is this cacophony of contradictions that so disturbs. Robert Dawidoff reminds us of a quilt's subtle rhetoric in his "Names Project" essay: "Human beings have always taken to the loom and the stitch when they wanted to honor life. Americans have quilted from the start. The idea was to pass along to generations something useful and beautiful, something to warm the outer and inner being" (155). This empowers The Quilt's "intended" effect, its multi-plot nature, its collaborative text, to subject itself to a plethora of interpretations and confusions. And there is never unity in this enveloping discourse. Some agree with Marita Sturken: "Cultural memory generated by this memorial to a controversial epidemic can be seen as inherently political; it defiantly marks the human toll of the epidemic and says: We must mourn the lives lost, challenge the homophobia that worsens the AIDS epidemic, and fight the policies that make prevention and treatment so difficult" (66). Others concur with Richard Mohr: "The Quilt is not then at heart to be read as a political document, although this is how it is usually read--a cheap alloy of electoral politics and pop psychology" (114). It is with these contradictory readings in mind that we must approach Robert Epstein's Academy Award winning documentary Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt (1989), which consciously employs a binary rhetoric, a "common" method, by which to read The Quilt's complex narrativity; this film provides, collectively, a deeply politicized voice, in essence, "an argument of conscious intent" (Nichols 7), speaking for those dead of AIDS, those who survive them, and those

CS 508187

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

still living with HIV.

We cannot overlook the inherently rhetorical parallel between the documentary feature and argumentative strategy. I propose to actively address this parallel as a pedagogical model; the rhetorical methodology involved in argumentative instruction mirrors the process of the filmic event. Most novice film readers view the documentary in a limited capacity, believing, for example, that a film about the NAMES Project Quilt would simply "document" the historic event of The Quilt's first public display at the Mall in Washington, D. C. This mistaken notion appears in a refined form by Erik Barnow, in his now classic discussion of cinematic technique. Here, he indicates while documentaries seek to record the images and sounds of a particular cultural event, as a form of non-fiction discourse, any documentary director "makes endless choices" which promote "his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not" (287-88). However, Barsam views this with more conscious intent--this "motive," a form of agenda, becomes the essence of the documentarist's vision, problematizing the notion of non-fiction film as a genre, and allowing it instead a level of "re-presentation" rather than "representation" (582). Developing this idea, Bill Nichols' Representing Reality claims that documentary film consistently takes this one step further; his elaboration appears particularly appropriate to this subject:

> Documentary films, though, are part and parcel of the discursive formations, the language games, and rhetorical stratagems by and through which pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation . . . . Documentary, like other discourse of the real, retains a vestigial responsibility to describe and interpret the world of collective experience . . . it joins these other discourses (of law, family, education, economics, politics, state, and nation) in the actual construction of social reality. (10)

Nichols sees the documentary as a "discourse of sobriety" (8) which uses the historical event and "discoursive formation" (10) to convey a truly politicized story. With this in mind, we can say that Epstein's Common Threads picks up where the material "Quilt" leaves off, giving a public voice to the many private discourse levels which characterize The Quilt's complexity.

Nichols' vocabulary implies a conscious structure with which to dissect the "documentary logic" of Common Threads' own binary discourse.[2] If we maintain that an argumentative essay's primary method follows the

writer/text/reader paradigm, we can more easily parallel the documentary's argumentative paradigm: director/film/spectator. In both, the text/film becomes the central mode of communication, while the writer/director interprets the argumentative issue, complete with its own history, context, and call to action, to the reader/spectator. If the text/film succeeds, the reader/spectator translates, through "indexical relations" (116), a "call" to overt "action" based on evidence the spectator witnesses second hand. We then measure the text's/film's effect through these indexical relations, varying degrees of awareness central to any argumentative impact, in an effort to observe the moral/political dichotomy of the filmic event, in essence, measuring the discoursive ability of The Quilt itself.

Sequence is the initial strategy for the documentary; just as organization lends cohesion to the essay, sequence provides an overall methodology to the film's argument. Generally, Common Threads splits into two distinct parts. The first permits five "storytellers," in essence, AIDS "survivors," to make their private stories public.[3] Epstein appears to have consciously chosen his storytellers to show "the very different paths of AIDS": We meet and listen to Tracey Torrey, a retired commander of the military, and Vito Russo, the film historian, gay men who both lost their lovers [and, ultimately, their own lives]; Sara Lewinstein, a lesbian mother who lost the gay father of her child; Sallie Perryman, an African-American wife and mother who lost her husband; and David and Suzi Mandell, a white, middle-class couple who lost their 11 year-old hemophiliac son.[4] Epstein curiously splits these tales into fragments by intersecting cuts/close-ups of various squares from The Quilt and NBC news footage, both of which symbolize the recurring pattern of all these private stories made public by The Quilt.

Epstein's decision to complicate the communal nature of these stories with traditional documentary news footage serves to heighten the subjectivity of the film.[5] Appearing in sound bites throughout the first segment, the footage lends another "story" to The Quilt--that of the Reagan administration's place in the rhetoric of AIDS. However, it is necessary to point out that the footage itself condemns Reagan, not the narration. This allows the film that "degree of subjectivity" necessary to remain persuasive. The news reel footage follows a chronological format, year by year, revealing the changing image of AIDS through the media, beginning as "a new type of mutated virus" "by no means an epidemic" in early 1981 to the "disease which is beginning to affect the rest of us" in 1987; the news bites ultimately weave a grim thread throughout the lives of the five private tales--the very public realities of the AIDS enigma underscore the central argument of the film.[6] The compilation and editing techniques of the news

footage montages create the degree of knowledge necessary to ethically inform the spectator of the path AIDS has taken to invade the collective conscience of America.

The next central element, character, becomes the chief responsibility of the storytellers as they make public their personal grief. The storytellers reveal their loved ones and their own AIDS-related experiences in five parts, edited throughout with the news/Quilt montages: the historical context of their relationship [how they met, what they liked to do, what they wanted to do with their lives], their initial "discovery" of AIDS in their collective lives, the storyteller's own response to the disease [and in some cases, their own diagnosis], and the painful details of their loved one's death. A longer, fifth sequence ends the film, where each storyteller joins many at the first public unveiling of the NAMES Project Quilt in Washington, D. C. These stories reveal the commonalities AIDS brings to each member personally involved, as each teller recounts their private memories of life and death with their loved ones; they bring to us, the spectator, that emotional edge which a purely historical documentary might wish to avoid. And in some cases, through home video, we actually witness the subject communicating with us, adding to the overall "character" effect.[7] Character centralizes the spectator's experience with the documentary subject, and each of these stories communicates a message of survival in the face of such overwhelming tragedy.

Epstein's use of dialogue/text sequencing argues his purpose on two very distinct levels. Most documentary features employ a standard "voice-over," a form of narration, which stitches the narrative together, ensuring a form of argumentative cohesion. Epstein's decision to allow his news footage its own rhetorical pattern, alongside the "dialogue" of the character interview footage, embellishes the overall narrative. This allows, in effect, three distinct levels of discourse, each working to communicate the moral/political, essentially private/public, binary of the epidemic. The main "voice-over," by Dustin Hoffman, sets a main tone of authority--not only does the average listener acknowledge Hoffman's status as a famed actor, but its evident "male" quality surely comes to us as the demonstrative voice of the patriarchy. In other words, Hoffman's knowledge and compassion instructs others to pay similar heed.[8] As intimated earlier, the voice of the news footage pointedly places blame at the doorstep of the Reagan/ultimately Bush White House. Many of the selected bites reveal a commitment on the part of the media to show the American public that the government needed to take earlier responsibility; these segments range from Roger Lyons' effective speech to Congress: "I came here today in the hope that my epitaph would not read that I

died of red-tape;" to Larry Kramer's adamant point to Jane Pauley on a "Today" show segment: "There is no question in my mind--if this were happening to you, and the white, straight, middle class community it would have been attended to a long time ago." As the "time-line" progresses, it becomes obvious how the media coverage grows to implicate the government for its indifference. Of course, the frequent cuts back to individual squares of The Quilt maintain the rising death toll for the spectator.

The character voices, those of Epstein's interviewees, certainly create an emotion-ridden text. One aspect they convey, which the patriarchal voices cannot, is sincere sadness--the voice of complete loss. Each interviewee speaks of loss in very personal terms, which becomes the common denominator of the disease's depiction in the film. This rings particularly true in those conversations with the Mandells, who effectively convey their own feelings of guilt in the loss of their son:

> You just stand there, because what choice do [you] have? Do I continue to allow him to live by using the blood product? Or, do I risk him even more? He might not get AIDS if I deny him that blood product, but what other kinds of injuries can he get if I deny him that which he needs? And, you go the only way you think best. I want him to live as well as he can right now.

Torrey speaks of the insensitivities involved with his lover's funeral: "I was required to be at my desk at the Pentagon at 8:30 in the morning, after having lost the most important person in my life, looking like a prim and proper Navy officer. Although the Navy thought I was carrying on official Navy business, I spent most of that day looking for a funeral director to take care of the funeral." Tom Wadell's video-will speaks to his daughter, Jessica, of his own personal traumas: "The horror I feel, and the fear of leaving you before you ever really know me is my greatest concern." Again, the event of The Quilt permits the public expression of those private, difficult moments prevalant in the complexities of AIDS.

Another, though more limited emotion, is anger, usually materializing in forms of retrospection. For instance, Vito Russo, consistently uses his own story to convey his helplessness in respect to the government and the medical establishment, especially over his initial misdiagnosis: "I believe the government has been criminally negligent . . . the President of the United States did not even say the woird "AIDS" until thousands had died. I know that there are drugs out there and I want to know why they are not being made available." Epstein frames Russo's

commentaries with other news footage from AIDS rallies, revealing the frustration all HIV positive people continue to experience in respect to the government's insensitivity. Even toward the end of the film, Mandell makes an angry though profound comparison between her loss and those of the other AIDS survivors:

> Too many people, too many people. Too much love--gone--too much tragedy. I took David's story, and what his loss meant to me and multiplied it by the number of panels, and it was just so horrendous. Every one of those persons represented by a panel was someone who was loved by somebody. And that loss--the tremendous loss--and I kept thinking of the possibilities for David--what he could have been, what his promise was, and how cut short it was, and again multiplied that by the number of panels.

What seems appropriate here is to note how The Quilt assists in articulating anger; in essence, it gives voice to those emotional complexities which continually appear somewhat inexplainable.

Despite this anger, we are party to some form of hope that each storyteller finds necessary to aid in the process of accepting loss; sadly it is the speaker's bout with their own mortality we witness. Sallie Perryman, in speaking of her own infection, simply asserts, "I am well, and everyday I am prayerful, and thankful that I am. In my mind, I have decided I am not going to get sick, I don't have to get sick." Torrey, filmed on his deathbed, glibly calls to his deceased lover, "Hang in there, buddy, cause it won't be long before we're together again!" Even Russo finds a spot of humor: "You immediately feel like Susan Hayward in I Want To Live! I have chosen to spend most of my time educating people." In each case, the dialogue/text informs with both knowledge and emotion the private nature of these losses, making public the voice of loss.

The final point of perspective instrumental to documentary logic consists of motivation, similar in nature to the rhetorical "call to action." Epstein's decision to end the film at the 1989 unveiling of The NAMES Project Quilt in Washington puts the entire documentary into a curiously dramatic context. Just when the audience expects closure, after the final interview appears to end, a black-out dissolves onto a blue sky, the camera following white birds flying in V-formation across the screen. This shot lowers its gaze to the ground, obviously the Washington Mall, and a band of people, unrolling yards and yards of white cloth--eventually these become the walkways of The Quilt--but as the volunteers unroll them, they appear like another curious Cristo "event." As the participants unfold panels, we recognize "voice-overs" of our interviewees, now explaining their personal histories with The NAMES

Project. Some appear proud of their efforts: Torrey tells us, "If I was going to have a panel, I thought I would make it myself;" Lewinstein admits: "I am so proud he [Dr. Tom Wadell] has so many squares; it means his message got through." Footage even shows us Sallie Perryman and her mother happily constructing a panel for her deceased husband, in much the same manner we might witness a traditional quilting bee from America's past. Others seem cautious of their reverence toward the project: Russo actually shows the cameramen the square he constructed for his deceased lover, admitting that "Jeff would hate it. He was neat and had everything in its place, while I am a big slob; I threw sloppy sequins all over it." Interestingly, he then qualifies this comment with a profound statement: "I don't want my name to appear next year on a quilt in front of the White House!" And still, others show us how the process can begin to heal the wounds opened by AIDS; the Mandells, in a moving point of discussion, appear to embody Cleve Jones' entire motive in establishing The Quilt when they speak of their contribution:[9]

> People had heard of the NAMES Project and asked me if I was going to make a panel for David. They said, "Why don't you come down to the Lesbian and Gay Men's Center"--at which I gulped . . . . We had not ventured far out of our little middle America home into that area of the city. But we said let's go . . . . It seemed like five minutes later David was very busy helping with a mailing, and I was busy stitching letters onto somebody else's panel . . . . and it seemed that, for the first time since my son's death, it was all right to laugh.

Of course, these mixed emotions further complicate the binary operations of The Quilt itself. But through the film's focus upon each square constructed to commemorate these loved ones now experienced in loss, the spectator begins to feel an integral part of the healing process. In its seemingly endless quality, a shot reveals much of the Mall covered by this huge quilt. A true sense of motivation fills the spectator on a similarly polar moral/political, private/public, attitude. The Quilt, in this respect, symbolizes action; the film provides The Quilt with a public voice to awaken all Americans, calling all to attention, empowering all spectators, as it reveals the traditional American notions of community spirit and effort in the face of personal horror.

While the critical discourse continues to differ in respect to The NAMES Project Quilt's overall effect, one item echoes regardless--we all would like to see an end to AIDS. Epstein's Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt

provides an avenue of common discourse for The Quilt; while it highlights the binary operations of the project, it attests to the binaries of our responsibilities, both moral and political, in the fight against this disease. It gives voice to this astounding memorial in a truly unique way, establishing The Quilt as a "living" tribute to the dead, and to the living. As the film ends, and we view the more than 2,000 panels which then made The Quilt via a wide-angle shot from overhead, we hear Vito Russo, once more, articulate this resounding commonality:

> I think what we want to see eventually is an end. A day when we can stop adding panels to this quilt and put it away as a symbol of a terrible thing that happened and is now over. We forget that some day this will be over--some day that there is going to be no such thing as AIDS and people will just look back and remember that there was a terrible tragedy that we survived.

In this respect, regardless of our position in the fight, we can penetrate the collective conscience of our student writers. The rhetorical, pedagogical lessons of The Quilt, particularly using Common Threads, involve each of us in the moral/political, public/private voices of the AIDS epidemic.

Works Cited

Barnow, Erik. Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film. New York: Oxford University, 1993.

Barsam, Richard M. Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History. Bloomington, Indiana University, 1992.

Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt. Directed by Richard Epstein, 1989.

Mohr, Richard. Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Nichols, Bill. Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991.

Ruskin, Cindy. The Quilt: Stories From The NAMES Project. New York: Pocket Books, 1988.

Sturken, Marita. "Conversations With The Dead: Bearing Witness in the AIDS Memorial Quilt." Socialist Review Vol. 22 No. 2 65-95.

Sullivan, Andrew. "Quilt." The New Republic. 2 November 1992, 43.

Notes

1. I presented a version of this paper at the 1993 College Conference on Composition and Communication in San Diego. I wish to thank Paul M. Puccio, Joseph Marchesani, and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles for reading early versions of this work while in progress.

2. What I mean to attribute to Bill Nichols is his vocabulary concerning the documentary event; the analogy to the rhetorical paradigm is my own.

3. "Storytellers" is Epstein's own word for his interviewees. During the closing credits, an image of each speaker in front of a Quilt panel of their own design appears with the running head "Our Storytellers;" this crosses the sexual preference, gender barriers which the spectator might notice initially, labeling each of their stories with a "common" signature.

4. These "survivors" represent The Quilt squares of David C. Campbell, Jeffery Sevick, Dr. Thomas Wadell, Roger Perryman, and David Mandell, Jr. respectably.

5. One of the four "degrees" Nichols claims to be in operation throughout the viewing of a documentary feature; the others include degrees of knowledge, self-consciousness, and communicativeness (126).

6. Vito Russo, in speaking of his own diagnosis, recounts the anger he personally felt when he read a Life magazine story in 1987, "telling all of us to watch out, because AIDS affected all of us now." This, of course, illustrates his belief that most middle Americans never acknowledges homosexuals as legitimate citizens.

7. We see many "home movies" from the Mandell family, showing their son David as a baby and during his last Christmas, when the "Make a Wish" foundation arranged a visit from the television character ALF. We also see some home video of Sarah Lewinstein's, showing Dr. Tom Wadell during his last months, illustrating her shock at his weight loss. She highlights her story with excepts from a taped will he left for their daughter, Jessica; in these, he explains how his body changes daily, and how he fears he will die before she ever gets to really know him. In this same light, our listening to Russo, Torrey [literally in his death-bed], and Perryman, is, in fact, our witnessing of their own pain in the face of AIDS and its inevitabilities.

8. It might be added that spectators may also recognize Hoffman's tone of compassion to be a result of his decision to play Ratso Rizzo in John Schlesinger's Midnight Cowboy (1969), or his role as Michael Dorsey, the unemployed actor who "becomes" Dorothy in Sydney Pollack's Tootsie (1982).

9. Cindy Ruskin's The Quilt: Stories From The NAMES Project cites Jones, the founder of the project, as stating that he hoped The Quilt made AIDS accessable: "By providing a glimpse of the lives behind the statistics . . . it will create an extraordinary, dramatic illustration of the magnitude of this epidemic--to the president, to Congress, and to the country. Also, it's a way for survivors to work through their greif in a positive, creative way. Quilts represent coziness, humanity, and warmth" (12).